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Life Forms in Pueblo Pottery

By ROY A. KEECH

FOR centuries the Pueblos have been using many life forms in their pottery decoration. Some of these have become so conventionalized as to be almost unrecognizable. Others can be proved to be animal or bird forms only by tracing the patterns back through various stages to more natural forms.

About five hundred different life forms have been found on the ancient Mimbres pottery from southern New Mexico alone (but only about twenty-five of these are recognizable. We find man, swallow, quail, parrot, owl, antelope, badger, bear, snake, mountain-lion, thunder bird (eagle), grasshopper, beetle, fish (although the Pueblos have not eaten fish for possibly thousands of years and now consider them poisonous), and others. The Mimbres people painted these designs in black on a whitish background. One bird (probably representing a quail) has a very natural head and beak, with nearly round body, and conventionalized tail much too long in proportion to the rest of the body. The one wing shown is very much conventionalized, but gives the effect of just alighting on the ground. The head, beak, and wing are solid black, but the body and most of the tail are covered with diametrically crossed black lines, with a perpendicular wide black stripe near the end, though the very end is divided into "feathers" and these are left the color of the background—merely outlined.

A thunder bird that I copied from an ancient Mimbres food bowl was a slightly conventionalized head with beak open, perfectly square body, two long triangular tail feathers, and very triangular wings. Its head is solid black with one white eye being shown. The wings and tail are solid black. The body is basically white, with very thin lines forming three squares inside, and with a solid black square in the center.

A Mimbres mountain-lion in my note-book is very much conventionalized. The body is oblong and contains a white cross at the left front shoulder and another incorporated in a geometric pattern which covers most of the body. The tail is black and white and disproportionately long. The head (turned sidewise) is black with one diamond shaped eye and a white collar at the base of the neck. In some Mimbres decoration the tail of the mountain-lion completely encircles the body.

I have also in my note-book a sketch from a Mimbres food bowl. This apparently represents a grasshopper. The head is very realistic, with open mouth, white eye, and two antennae. The body is black with a white diamond shaped space containing a geometric design and dots representing seeds (for fertility). There are only three legs, and these protrude from just back of the head. The tail is white, with a geometric striped design, long, and curved like the blade of a knife. The head and body of this grasshopper are inclosed in a white area. This white space has a very striking resemblance to the head of a rabbit, with an indentation for its mouth, and two big long ears. These complicated designs, with small white crosses between them, encircled the inside of the bowl, making a pleasingly beautiful decoration.

Another Mimbres food bowl that I have seen contains in the center three conventionalized life forms. What I believe to represent a grasshopper stands on two legs with its front legs in the air. What I take for a beetle stands on its hind legs on the grasshopper's back and holds to the antennae of the grasshopper with its front feet. Fastened to the nose of the beetle is a fish, in much the same position that a dirigible rides at its mooring. All three life forms contain geometric designs in white.

The ancient Hopi, of the Little Colorado River district in Arizona, used various parrot designs in black and red. As the people conventionalized these parrots, each

successive design looked less and less like a bird. It was only by tracing backward that their significance was discovered. Both ancient and modern Hopi have made use of very conventionalized serpents. These are called "sky dragons," "winged serpents," "horned serpents," or "Awanyu." This Awanyu is the dominant religious symbol of all modern Pueblos. It symbolizes fecundity, the bringing of rain, and the meeting of heaven and earth. (At Unshagi, New Mexico, in August of 1932, I excavated a beautiful Hopi potsherd with the tail of the Awanyu on it. This fragment may have been buried in that rubbish heap five hundred or more years ago, yet it was practically the same ware that the Hopis are making today.) The modern Hopi, by the way, are probably producing the most beautiful of all colored Pueblo pottery. This is polychrome with a soft buff background; the Awanyu design is used extensively. These conventionalized serpents were also used by the people of Pecos pueblo (extinct since 1838).

The ancient Casas Grandes people of Chihuahua, Mexico, used life forms in their decoration that were unique. The human, bird, or serpent forms were usually within triangular or rectangular spaces of involved geometric designs. The serpents are so extremely conventionalized that they would be hard to recognize without the horns, which identify them beyond a possibility of doubt.

One very beautiful geometric design is in the form of a perfect square, at the corners of which are the triangular bodies of birds. Each bird has a mere crook and two lines to represent its head and tail. This is one of the ancient so called black-on-whites.

These same Casas Grandes people molded many small polychrome bowls, pots, and jugs into shapes that suggest animals or birds; the decoration on these is geometric. The owl figure is probably the most common of these. There are also bear forms and heads of birds and turtles (the turtle being another symbol of fecundity) for handles on many of these pieces.

The now extinct people of the Pajarito Plateau, in northern New Mexico, used many triangular bird forms on their pottery. Some of these were very lifelike; others were extremely conventionalized. These were usually outlined with a heavy glazed black line, which added much to the decorative effect. The Pajaritans also made a few pieces that faintly resembled the shape of bodies of birds, but without heads.

The ancient people of the famous Mesa Verde area, of Colorado, used bird patterns on their pottery. These designs were more lifelike than those of Casa Grandes.

Most of the modern Pueblo potters make use of some animal, bird, or plant life forms. Cochiti incorporates the cloud symbol into their birds and flowers with pleasing results, thus adding potency to their prayers for rain. Santo Domingo uses many flower designs with distinctive petals and leaves in red and black. There have been found over a hundred types of flowers and the same approximate number of leaf groupings, all from simple basic patterns. Santo Domingo rain birds can usually be distinguished by curved lines representing wings (although I have seen the same type of wings occasionally used on Zia birds), and two straight lines typifying the beak. In the beak, the lower line is shorter than the upper. These fine potters of Santo Domingo have begun to use red just recently, and only to please the white people. They still use the black alone on a whitish background.

The women of Zia make some of the best of all Pueblo pottery. Every piece is made as carefully as though it were to be used in their own homes and then handed down as an heirloom or buried with a loved one. No pains are spared in modeling, baking, or decorating. While their pieces are not so beautiful as some from other pueblos, their ware is probably as serviceable as the best. The most common Zia rain bird is a complicated pattern with small head having two ears, often three perfectly straight tail feathers, nar-

row curved wings, two long bent legs, and a body with white diamond design containing egg and seed symbols for fertility. I have a Zia water bottle on my shelf, however, which has a typical Acoma parrot design, although, otherwise, the canteen is the usual Zia type in every way.

San Ildefonso potters have produced many beautiful patterns containing serpent, feather, and leaf symbols. Some of their rain birds are very fine. Incorporated in these birds we find cloud and altar symbols. These are done in black and red on a whitish background. But these people are now creating mostly the beautiful black polished ware with striking designs in dull black. The Awanyu is often seen on these modern pieces. San Ildefonso is today probably the best known of all Pueblo ceramics.

Among the modern Pueblos, undoubtedly, the people of Zuni use the most bird and animal forms. The Zuni deer is easily recognized anywhere, by its one large white spot on the rump, and the red arrow running down its throat to about the region of its heart. The Zunis use several relatively small birds, usually in solid red or black. Although there are many of these little birds, varying in their decorative curved lines, nearly all of them may be recognized as representing one species of bird. They are called by the Indians "road runners," even though there is not the slightest resemblance to that bird. The Zunians also make use of the thunder bird, tadpole, frog, dragon-fly, Awanyu, and others. A thunder bird that a Zuni boy sketched for me, indicating the proper colors, is beautiful in its design and color arrangement. The head is turquoise blue, with short neck. The eye is indicated by an inverted black "V," with a yellow dot in the center. The beak is medium yellow, large and curved, with a black curved line to show where the upper and lower parts join. The wings are straight and solid black, with inverted altar symbols at the ends. The body is nearly square, and divided into three sections (the lines of division curving down from a point in the

top center); the left section is turquoise blue, the middle black, and the right yellow. A black and white narrow checked baldric passes from the left shoulder to the hip. Below the body is a belt of three stripes, upper and lower white, and the center stripe medium red. There is a triangular red apron below this. The tail spreads fan-like; white to near the end, where it is scalloped; then black with saw teeth at the end, indicating tips of feathers. This thunder bird, however, is not used on pottery, for the Zuni do not use the blue and yellow on ceramics.

Of the many birds on the beautiful Acoma pottery, except for the parrot and thunder bird, there are no recognizable species. This does not imply any lack of observation on the part of the Acoma potters, for the Pueblos are natural students of nature. Neither does it suggest a lack of artistic ability, for their art is based on sound principles of design, and much of it is done with surprising skill. It is safe to assume, therefore, that a certain degree of realism was deliberately sacrificed to symbolism, and that their ability to paint the characteristic features of the eagle, the quail, or any other bird or animal was applied to the decorative arrangement of the more important symbolism.

The thunder bird (so important in a study of the Acoma pottery), although we find some specimens of it on the pottery of the pre-historic Casas Grandes ware, is probably not extremely old in the Southwest. The best authority on Indian ritualism, symbolism, and mythology says that the original rain diety of the Pueblos was not a thunder bird, but an old woman. He also states that the thunder bird came from the Plains area, much as other cultural elements have gradually sifted in from there since, including the feathered headdress and the beaded vest.

The double thunder bird is, undoubtedly, the latest of the life forms to appear on Pueblo pottery. We have no definite knowledge of where this originated or when it first appeared in Pueblo decoration. We find it on no prehistoric

pottery. This, I believe, is a possible solution to the problem: the Mohammedan conquests carried the double eagle emblem to Spain. Then, four hundred years ago, when Charles V was king of Spain and Austria and Holy Roman emperor of Germany, the double eagle became much used in Spain. It was during this reign that Cortez conquered Mexico. The double eagle, therefore, became widely known in that country, and gradually worked its way north into New Mexico. So far as I know, it is only used among the Pueblos by the Acoma potters, where it is called the double thunder bird. It is most often seen on their canteens, or water bottles.

The Acoma parrots are interesting both in design and history. They are usually painted in red, orange, and black on a whitish background. The head is curved, with a large parrot-like bill, and a cock's comb on top of the head. The body and the one wing are outlined in graceful curves. Two or three large tail feathers are straight with rounded ends. The eye is usually a round white spot with a black dot in the center. The wing is apt to have two white dots to represent seeds, and the body usually has either cloud or egg symbols. One may at first wonder where the Pueblos of New Mexico learned of the parrot. These birds were at one time, no doubt, indigenous to the state. Archaeologists believe that they were sacred to the Pueblos, for they have been found buried in crypts with much care. That the parrot is not new to these people is, I believe, proved by the fact that they have words for parrot in at least three of the six Pueblo tongues; The Towa word is *ze-la-ma*, the Tewa word is *tan-si*, and the Keres word is *chau-wi-ki*.

And so, from beginning to end, one may find the study of life forms in Pueblo pottery decoration interesting, from the standpoint of ethnology, natural history, or esthetics.